

Norwood's Notes: Brief Summaries of Bible Stories

These "notes" are intended to provide a general overview of the basic stories of the Bible in the hope of building greater biblical knowledge and encouraging Bible reading and study. For more information, visit www.UjimaChurch.org

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32 - Highlights from Ezra 1-10, "Returning and Rebuilding the Temple"

The Persian Empire had conquered the Babylonians, and just as had been prophesied by Jeremiah, the Lord stirred King Cyrus of Persia to state in a proclamation that, *"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all of the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go but to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel – he is the God who is in Jerusalem"* (Ezr 1:2-4 ESV). The heads of the houses of Judah and Benjamin along with priests and Levites who had lived in Babylonian exile prepared for the journey back to Jerusalem under the reign of Persians. They gathered the vessels from the temple that had been taken before it was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. A wave of about 50,000 exiles returned back to Jerusalem to begin the work of rebuilding the temple (Ezr 2).

The altar for burnt offerings was once again set up and the Jews kept the ancient Feast of Booths, remembering the Exodus from Egyptian bondage that had happened a thousand years before (Ezr 3). Under the guidance of Zerubbabel, the governor, and Jeshua, the priest, the builders laid the foundation of the temple and the people celebrated according to the directions left by King David, singing songs of praise to the Lord. Many of the older ones, who remembered Solomon's Temple before it had been destroyed, wept aloud as they saw the new foundation.

When the people who had occupied the land heard of the return of the exiles and realized that they were rebuilding the temple, they opposed them. They sent a letter to the new Persian King, Artaxerxes, claiming that the returning Jewish exiles were disloyal and would rebel if the Temple and Jerusalem were rebuilt. King Artaxerxes ordered the work to cease. No more work was done until King Darius reigned over the Persian Empire (Ezr 4).

The prophets Haggai and Zechariah prophesied in the name of God, encouraging the leaders and the people to once again take up the work of rebuilding the Temple. Once again, their adversaries opposed them. But, the Jews sent word to King Darius that they were only doing

what had been decreed by his predecessor, King Cyrus (Ezr 5). A search was made in the archives of the Empire, and the scroll was found with the proclamation of Cyrus. King Darius ordered that the work on the house of God continue without opposition and that funds and supplies be sent for the work of the builders and the priests! King Darius warned that any who prevented the Jews from completing the temple would be executed and then the king asked that the priests pray for him and his sons! The King then wrote, *"May the God who has caused his name to dwell there overthrow any king or people who shall put out a hand to alter this, or to destroy this house of God that is in Jerusalem. I Darius make a decree; let it be done with all diligence"* (Ezra 6:12 ESV). The work continued until the Temple was completed. The people celebrated Passover with great joy.

The Lord spoke through the prophet Haggai saying, *"The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the LORD of hosts"* Haggai 2:9 ESV). Even though the second Temple was humble in comparison to the one built by King Solomon centuries before, God promised that this second Temple would exceed the first in glory. This promise was fulfilled centuries later, for this Temple would be visited by Jesus Christ.

Another wave of exiles returned, and Ezra, a scholar of the Law of God, came with the order of the king that, *"...according to the wisdom of your God that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province Beyond the River, all such as know the laws of your God. And those who do not know them, you shall teach"* (Ezra 7:25 ESV). Ezra organized the priests and Levites for their service to the Lord in the Temple, according to the Law of God (Ezr 8). He found that many of the Levites had broken the Law of God by taking foreign wives who did and did not worship the Lord. Ezra was shocked that the people had fallen back into the ways that had led them astray and resulted in their exile so many years before (Ezr 9). He led the people in confessing their sin and swearing their obedience to the Lord (Ezr 10).